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The New Independent  
Argentine Cinema, 1995-1999

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# Los hijos de Menem: The New Independent Argentine Cinema, 1995–1999

**Tamara L. Falicov**

Beginning in 1995, a new gritty urban style of filmmaking emerged in Argentina. This group of fresh talent came primarily from a host of new film schools that opened in Buenos Aires (in addition to the few established film programs like Avellaneda in Greater Buenos Aires) in the early to mid-1990s. Without calling themselves a 'movement,' these filmmakers made cinema in a language that contested the imitative style of Hollywood, and yet they often rejected the auteurist approach of the well-established Argentine film community. These new experiments performed moderately well at the box office,<sup>1</sup> and were given labels such as *El nuevo cine argentino* (New Argentine Cinema), *Las películas argentinas jóvenes de éxito* (Young Argentine Film Successes), or *El nuevo cine independiente argentino* (New Independent Argentine cinema). This essay documents the rise of this group of filmmakers and compares them to a previous film movement dominated by young people called the *Nueva ola* (New Wave) that occurred in the 1960s. Funding issues are explored in conjunction with a narrative and aesthetic description of a few films. Moreover, an overview of two established film schools in Buenos Aires will further describe the atmosphere for a new generation of filmmakers in Argentina. The films discussed in this essay are limited to those produced until 1999. Therefore, more recent films such as *Esperando al mesías/Waiting for the Messiah* (Daniel Burman, Argentina, 2000), *La ciénaga/The Swamp* (Lucrecia Martel, Argentina, 2001), *Nueve reinas/Nine Queens* (Fabián Bielinsky, Argentina, 2001) among others, are not included in this essay. However, it is important to note that these newer films are significant in that they have won prizes at major film

festivals (the most notable being *La ciénaga/The Swamp* that won a Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2001 for Best Debut). These films were completed during a period that preceded the horrendous economic crisis that befell Argentina beginning December 2001. Currently, at the time of writing (July 2002), there is speculation that further film production will be suspended until at least the end of the year. With the *peso* in such a precarious state, it is unfeasible to finance films until more stability is reached. This situation is not new—it continues as part of a larger cycle of boom and bust in Argentina's film production history.

### ***Young Film Directors, Film Schools, and Óperas primas (film debuts)***

In 1994, the Film Loan Committee (Comité de Crédito) of the National Film Institute (that year it was newly named the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales or INCAA) met to select film projects for State funding. Martín Rejtman, a young director, was a first-time applicant for funds to make his debut, *Rapado/Skinhead* (Argentina, 1991). The committee decided that the film merited the 'without special interest' (*sin interés especial*) classification. This in effect meant that no subsidies would be awarded. It was unclear why the film was rejected (*Haciendo cine* 1996, 37).<sup>2</sup> The news stunned the young filmmaking community, who at once felt a sense of abandonment by the film establishment. Rejtman responded: 'it was a question of ignorance [...] The committee members only have one way of thinking about national cinema, and [...] any proposals that move away from their established models of what is national and popular, do not deserve to be taken seriously' (Universidad del Cine 1996, 53). Young filmmakers already faced obstacles in obtaining funding relative to established filmmakers, and yet the INCAA did little to equalize this disparity at that time.

*Rapado* (1991) (released in 1995) was produced because Rejtman, at the age of thirty, obtained funding from cultural agencies in France and the Netherlands. The film was well received in film art circles and was praised for its minimalist aesthetic (lack of dialogue, sparseness of the *mise-en-scène*, etc.). The director stated that it was his intention to produce a film that worked against the conventions often found in Argentine cinema, such as moving away from excessive dialogue and a moralizing tone. In an interview he stated that his creative processes '... started from zero. [Within Argentine cinema], if there are elements that do not interest me [such as the abovementioned conventions], then how can I achieve something within this chaos? So I pared everything down' (Ricagno and Quintín 1996, 14). This new material that younger filmmakers were exploring through unconventional scripts such as Rejtman's and others may have hindered their chances of receiving approval from the Film Loan Committee members.

Sergio Wolf, film critic, has noted that these filmmakers try to resist the stereotypes that negatively tinge Argentine cinema, such as how film dialogue 'dictates the limits of speech, by substituting how people speak with how people *should* speak.' He argues that there is a new Argentine cinema that has chosen a particular poetic language and aesthetic, and these young filmmakers, he argues, 'resist globalization by choosing different parameters and affinities or affiliations that are less standardized and that appeal to a different kind of spectator' (Wolf 1993, 4). Rejtman, for example, labels his cinema as one of 'surfaces' (*cine es superficie*) because, as he put it, 'there is really nothing beyond the screen' (Suárez 2002, n.p.). Film critic Claudio España observes that more generally there is a disenchantment that pervades most of these independent films, but rather than 'prescribe solutions, [they] just present the facts by inscribing them within personal narratives' (España 2000, 14). This new poetic, illustrated by the work of Rejtman, was at first rejected by the National Film Institute. However, as the film student population grew larger and their voices louder, spaces opened up for 'alternative cinema' in theatres and film festivals abroad. With these changes, coupled with the provisions made as part of the new cinema law for *operas primas* (debut films), the INCAA slowly opened its doors to this new group of filmmakers.

### ***Film Schools in Buenos Aires and Other Argentine Cities***

At the same time that the INCAA instituted the new methods of allocating funds, film schools were beginning to open and expand in the 1990s. Many private schools opened in Buenos Aires, a few established by well-known film directors. Currently, most of the private schools are quite expensive to attend, but there are a few State schools that are free of charge. Two distinguished programs in the State university system are that of the University of Buenos Aires and a State film school in the suburb of Avellaneda. The most prestigious schools in Buenos Aires are Manuel Antón's Universidad del Cine and the National Film Institute's film school, the Centro de Experimentación y Realización Cinematográfica (Center of Experimental Film Direction, known as CERC). However, six or seven other schools have emerged in the capital, in addition to regional schools offering instruction in film production in the cities of Rosario, Córdoba, La Plata, and elsewhere (Chatruc 1996, 20).<sup>3</sup>

Patricia Moro, the director of the INCAA-run school under Mahárbiz (head of the INCAA during President Menem's second term in office) estimated that in 1997 over ten thousand students were studying film production in Argentina. Others, such as film critic Fernando Peña, estimate the figure at closer to four thousand. In either case, these numbers represent a large increase over previous years. Thus, these young filmmakers needed a way to integrate themselves into the structure of the film industry.

## *Film Students and the INCAA*

Since the 1970s, young filmmakers have had to compete for State funding alongside more experienced film directors and producers. Therefore, while efforts by the established film community were made to democratize the process of obtaining film funding during debates in Congress over proposed cinematic legislation, young filmmakers and students voiced their complaints in the hope of change. Thanks to their efforts, a decree was passed following the introduction in 1994 of what has been dubbed 'the New Cinema Law', that provided funding opportunities for first-time filmmakers. The INCAA initiated a few competitions for debut filmmakers to make their *operas primas* (debut films).

A yearly screenplay competition was established for young filmmakers that awarded \$40,000 for the production of short films (*cortometrajes*) in 35mm. In 1995 and 1997 approximately seventeen awards were given, and the end results were two feature films made up of the short films, known as *Historias breves/Short Stories* (Various, Argentina, 1995) and *Historias breves II/Short Stories II* (Various, Argentina, 1997). Both films have been shown throughout Argentina and at film festivals to sell-out crowds. Five awards are given annually for 'telefilms', or TV movies. Some of the winners from both competitions included Bruno Stagnaro (aged twenty-five), from the Universidad del Cine, for *Guariso/ War is Over*, Adrián Caetano (aged twenty-seven), for *Cuesta abajo / Downward Slope*, who studied at a film school in Barcelona, Spain, and Lucretia Martel for *Rey muerto/ Dead King*. Those who won the 'telefilms' competition in 1996 included Stagnaro and Caetano (*Pizza, birra, faso/ Pizza, Beer, Smokes*); Fernando Diaz (*Plaza de almas/ Soul Plaza*), who also studied at the Universidad del Cine; and Fernando Musa (*Fuga de cerebros/ Brain Drain*), who studied at the INCAA's film school, the CERC. Other award-winning students who trained at the CERC were twenty-nine-year-old Diego Kaplan (*¿Sabes nadar?/ Can you Swim?*) and Esteban Sapir, aged thirty-one (*Picado fino/ Finely Cut*).

The outcome of these competitions signaled a renewed interest in young talent. During the screening of *Historias breves*, many of the winners, who were young filmmakers from different schools and cities, with varied experiences, met and discussed the possibilities of collaborating on future film projects. They stated in various interviews that although the INCAA brought them together for the first time, as young directors they did not feel integrated into the larger film community, and thus have since collaborated with each other in planning scripts and film shoots (Pitt and Schaer 1998, 50).

The following two sections provide an overview of two film schools in Buenos Aires, the Universidad del Cine (University of Film), a private school, and the INCAA-run public school, the Centro de Experimentación y Realización Cinematográfica (CERC).

### ***La Universidad del Cine/ The University of Cinema***

Two years after Manuel Antín left his post as director of the National Film Institute, he founded what was then called the Fundación Universidad del Cine (Foundation for the University of Cinema) in 1989. Although it has since received accreditation as a degree-granting institution (and therefore is no longer a foundation), the school is still commonly referred to as the FUC. Considered the most prestigious institution (but also the most costly, with fees of \$500.00 per month if the student does not receive scholarship funds), it has become the film school that produces the most student projects in South America. In addition, of all of the Argentine film schools, it has shown the most student films abroad in film festivals (*El amante de cine* 1995, 44). One such film, *Moebius* (Mosquera et al., Argentina, 1995), based on a story written by national writer laureate Jorge Luis Borges, was the result of an advanced production seminar involving forty-five students under the supervision of filmmaker Gerardo Mosquera. The film appeared at numerous film festivals in 1995, and won awards for cinematography and sound at the Havana Film Festival. It aroused the interest of international distributors, and provided an opportunity for Mosquera to obtain work in Hollywood (Moss 1997, 79). *Mala época/ Bad Times* (Mariano de Rosa et al., Argentina, 1998) was the second feature-length film to be made entirely by students at Antín's school.

### ***The Center For Experimentation and Directing (CERC)***

The CERC was founded in 1965 as part of the National Film Institute. Always free of charge, the school holds competitive entrance exams each year to allow the top students to attend. In 1995, eight students were admitted for each of five majors. Since then, there has been such overwhelming demand that the number of places has increased dramatically. In 1997, the CERC admitted an additional eighty students, thus increasing the student body to 170 students ('Nueva sede para la Escuela y la Cinemateca Nacional' 1998, 43). Part of the expansion stemmed from the inclusion of students from the provinces who were guaranteed a percentage of places as a result of the new cinema legislation. This program, while limited in terms of resources, has been successful in producing nationally recognized directors and producers. It is the oldest and only federal film institution in the country, and the only one responsible for providing training for students from all over the country.

### ***The 'New Generation' of Argentine Filmmakers***

Many recent film graduates have been successful in releasing feature-length films. Out of twenty-eight films released in 1997, seven were from

first-time filmmakers, the majority under thirty years old. All of these films exhibited a realism that exposed a side of Argentina that most medium-budget, middle-class dramas had not. These filmmakers look at problems in Argentine society with a quirky, youth-oriented perspective. With very low budgets, this type of cinema has enabled first-time directors to experiment with film in ways that are more daring and bold than the work of more established film directors. However, because of tight funding situations, many directors have used co-productions (such as the French group Fond Sud, known for helping 'developing countries' in cultural matters) and other methods (donated labor, etc.) to complete projects. For example, *Pizza, birra, faso* was made with \$300,000 dollars, \$187,500 given by the INCAA, and the remainder provided by a Dutch foundation.

Directors like Caetano and Stagnaro (*Pizza, birra, faso*) or Sapir (*Picado fino*) tell visual stories about a generation of youth who are not status-seeking middle-class Argentines. They are either poor street youth who rob to make a living on the Buenos Aires streets, or they are 'Generation X'-style youth who encounter problems in everyday life, but are realistically portrayed without the characteristic clichés (youth as 'slackers', drug addicts, etc.). *Pizza, birra, faso* is about two youths in Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Pablo (Héctor Anglada and Jorge Sesán), who commit robberies on the streets and in the bars of the city. It is also about human relationships, and how Córdoba tries to escape life on the streets with his pregnant girlfriend Sandra (Pamela Jordán).

Claudio España notes that the film demonstrates how 'the protagonists are overwhelmed by the city, but try to become a part of it at any cost, [and by doing so], they paradoxically regard its center as an urban periphery' (España 2000, 12). He and other critics have also recognized the trend whereby 'invisible' populations in Argentina—immigrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru among others—have begun to appear in some of these films. While typically occupying lower paying jobs and without much political voice, their 'existence had previously gone unacknowledged on Argentina's screens' (España 2000, 12).

Adrián Caetano, one of the co-directors of *Pizza, birra, faso*, went on to direct the hard-hitting black-and-white film *Bolivia* (Argentina, 2000). It depicts a day in the life of a Bolivian immigrant who works as a cook in a Buenos Aires café. In addition to depicting racism and xenophobia in the workplace and on the street, the film moves beyond his place of work to describe the typical immigrant's experiences when inserting himself into a social milieu of other recently arrived workers. The film poignantly shows the protagonist learning to live in a society that does not allow much opportunity for or display tolerance towards these newcomers.

Many of these films have been well received both by critics and young film audiences because they depart from the typical story lines and images found in Argentine cinema. *Clarín* film critics José Bellas and Pablo Schan-

ton write of *Pizza, birra, faso* that it 'is not filled with 'psicobolche' (slang for 'leftist psycho-babble') moralisms, nor forced dialogue by characters that know what happened during the military dictatorship of which the other characters are unaware' (Bellas and Schanton 1998, 4). In an interview with some of the young filmmakers, they commented that contemporary Argentine cinema, from their vantage point, 'doesn't want to tell a story, rather, it wants to make a statement' (Quintín and Bernades 1995, 25).<sup>4</sup> However, this is not to say that these younger filmmakers are not grappling with social issues that affect the Argentine public. The difference is that their stories are told from a different standpoint, and they are not openly polemic or ideological.

*Plaza de almas/Soul Plaza* (Fernando Díaz, Argentina, 1997), for example, depicts the life of two young people, Marcelo (Alejandro Gance) and his girlfriend (Vera Fogwill). The main protagonist lives with his grandparents because his father has died and his mother lives in Spain. The plot centers on the disclosure of family secrets, such as spousal abuse, deception, and other domestic problems. The main character's grandfather (Norman Briski), while seeming warm and caring, actually turns out to be a man with violent tendencies. Although not framed as a military torturer, he still demonstrates an authoritarian disposition because he spent years abusing his wife (Olga Zubarry) without any repercussions. The lead female character, played by actress Vera Fogwill,<sup>5</sup> experiences her own trauma when she realizes that she is pregnant and decides to have a termination. The scene in the abortion clinic is one of the most powerful and unsettling parts of the whole film due to its gritty, unrelenting realism. Films such as this are testaments to the 'new poetic style', as Sergio Wolf describes these emerging voices (Wolf 1993, 4).

Another such film to garner critical attention was the first feature by Pablo Trapero, aged twenty-seven, who graduated from Antón's Universidad del Cine. His film, *Mundo grúa/Crane World* (Argentina, 1999) was shot entirely in black and white and took over one year to film. The main character, Rulo (Luis Magnini) is an unemployed construction worker who would like to be a crane operator. He has a teenage son and lives in the older suburbs of Buenos Aires. Trapero wanted to depict daily life in Greater Buenos Aires (a densely populated region of the country almost as large as Buenos Aires proper), a location where few films have been set.

Apart from Adriana Azemberg, a well-respected actress (who plays Rulo's love interest), and two other actors, the majority of the cast, including Rulo, were not professional actors. In a manner echoing Italian neo-realism or what has been dubbed the 'neo-neo-realism' of filmmaking in Argentina, Trapero's hope was to create a mood evocative of that style of filmmaking. *Mundo grúa* reflects Trapero's philosophy that 'daily life in itself is absurd' (Lerer 2000, 6) by painting a realist portrait of a man in search of work and his identity in a globalized world. Moreover, Rulo has still not emotionally



resolved the loss of his former years and heyday as a musician in a semi-successful rock band during the 1970s. The prospects for work are daunting; his lack of opportunities forces him to leave his neighborhood, family, and girlfriend to look for work in the south of the country. It is a tale of limited possibilities in Argentina, a reality known too well by many.

*Mundo grúa* was Trapero's first feature film. His first short was an eighteen-minute piece entitled *Negocio/Store* about a day in the life of his father's auto parts store. This film won first prize at a Short Film Festival in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Based on the success of that film he won a \$20,000 grant from the Rotterdam film festival's Hubert Bals fund to make his first feature. In addition to this money, Trapero enlisted family and friends to donate money to the project. One of his benefactors was his grandmother, a person who also acted in this film (she played Rulo's mother). He did not receive any funding from the National Film Institute. *Mundo grúa* was filmed in 16 mm and later was blown up to 35mm. With reference to the shoestring budget and lack of resources on the set, Trapero quipped: 'Neither did we have the best lenses, so all of this discussion of the dirtiness of the image was something I liked' (Babino 1999, 26).

While some critics have taken note of this 'dirty realism' that helped create a strong documentary feel, authors Bernades, Lerer, and Wolf go on to point out that in 1995 the Danish digital video movement Dogma 95 was created in reaction to the excessive Hollywood glitter and special effects in films of that decade. Their clarion call was to revert back to a simpler, 'bare-bones' style of filmmaking that privileged the story over the glossy aesthetics, special effects, and highly paid stars. While 1995 could also be considered the year that young Argentine filmmakers began showing their films in national theaters or other venues, theirs was an aesthetic born out of 'necessity and urgency' and not, as the abovementioned critics note 'as a movement that sprung out of a "bourgeois experiment"' (Bernades, Lerer, and Wolf 2002, 10).

*Mundo grúa*, with its simple plotline that captured the sentiment of a population stung by the cruel realities of a neoliberal Argentina, garnered prizes at the Venice Film Festival and the Rotterdam festival, and Luis Magnini won the prize for Best Actor at the first annual Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival, inaugurated in 1999. Magnini, himself an auto mechanic and a friend of Trapero's father, could only act in the film on the weekends when his shop was closed. Like his character, he too was a successful rock musician in the 1970s. He has gone on to star in other films directed by this young generation of filmmakers.

### ***El Nuevo Cine Argentino (The New Argentine Cinema)***

While these filmmakers have a different, more critical vision of Argentine reality, they nonetheless apply to the INCAA for funding, and thus they are

working within the film establishment to make their films. This contrasts with an earlier youth film movement in the 1960s, known as the '60s Generation' or the *Nueva ola*. This earlier movement of young filmmakers rejected the studio system of the era and preferred to make both short and feature-length films based on literary works about middle-class urban alienation. At that point in time, the INC refused to grant loans to these young directors, and thus the movement was marginalized by official film culture. It was only later, after the films were given international awards, that they were accepted into the official discourse of the Film Institute. Manuel Antín notes some differences between the film movement he participated in thirty years ago and this new breed of filmmakers: 'They [the new 90s generation] are not alone the way we were in the search for a better world. The INCAA supports them, actors and film union workers understand them, and the film critics believe in them' (Antín 1998, 11).

This new style of filmmaking, although still not accepted in mainstream movie theater circuits, is nonetheless supported by the Film Institute and is thus offered financial backing as well as opportunities to compete abroad in film festivals. For example, in 1997, for the first time in festival history, the Film Competition Selection Committee nominated three films to represent Argentina. All three were made by first-time filmmakers: *La vida según Muriel/Life According to Muriel* (Eduardo Milewicz, Argentina, 1997), *Plaza de almas*, and *Pizza, birra, faso*. According to film critic Ricardo García Oliveri, these choices were unusual in an international forum where typically films by seasoned directors with name recognition are chosen for their more 'formal' qualities. He applauded the INCAA for proposing such 'stimulating, refreshing, and risk-taking films' (García Oliveri 1997, n.p.).

Geoff Gilmore, head programmer for the Sundance Film Festival, stated that 'currently there are only two places—Japan and Argentina—where there is a resurgence of a new and interesting group of film directors' (Montesoro and Battle 1999, n.p.). Echoing that sentiment, articles by film critics state that young film directors are receiving a positive response abroad, and are now 'eclipsing the Subielas, Solanas, and Aristarains, those consecrated figures that up to a few months ago were the only references that Argentine cinema had on the international level' (*La Nación* 1999, n.p.). Fernando Díaz's *Plaza de almas* won two awards at the Mar del Plata film festival. One was for best Ibero-American film, and the other was the top prize awarded by the National Catholic Organization (OCIC). *Pizza, birra, faso* won the award for best Latin American Film from the International Press Federation (FIPRESI) at the Mar del Plata film festival in 1998.

Film students and young directors are actively encouraged to attend the annual Mar del Plata film festival. For one thing, many scholarships are given to film students from the various schools to attend. Many are given transportation, accommodation, and a discounted rate for movie tickets.

Patricia Moro commented that at the CERC in 1997 seventy students were given scholarships to attend the film festival, along with five professors (Interview, 1998). In addition, during the same year, the Universidad del Cine, headed by Manuel Antín, organized the third International Festival of Film Schools, held within the Mar del Plata festival. The awards ceremony, the highlight, featured members of the film jury, such as famed Argentine documentary filmmaker Fernando Birri and Spanish actor Eusebio Poncela.

One consequence of the proliferation of film school graduates is a source of inexpensive labor. The global phenomenon that is called the 'flexibilization' of labor has affected film production in Argentina. The traditionally strong power of the film union SICA (Sindicato de la Industria Cinematográfica Argentina) has weakened, and new laws have stipulated that film student assistants must be paid for their work on film shoots. In addition, the laws that made union work mandatory have also been weakened with the 'downsizing' of all industries, including film. Thus, film students have embarked on producing films on a shoestring budget with their fellow students. This has created a different atmosphere on the film set, according to Fernando Díaz:

Evidently these people [film students] are entering the job market in a big wave. Everyday there are more film schools and this will create a change [in film production crews]. I think that film work happens through personal contacts. For me, I'd prefer to have someone drive a truck that I can engage in a dialogue.

(Pitt and Schaer 1998, 50)

This form of interdependence that young filmmakers have come to rely on to initiate and complete film projects has given rise to other kinds of support services to assist young filmmakers not only in joining an already existing film community, but at the same time, in creating a new one for themselves. Rather than depending on technicians in the film union (SICA), or established film journals, they are creating new forms of cinema culture. For instance, in the early 1990s, at least five or six film magazines created by young filmmakers appeared on newsstands. Titles such as *Film*, *Sin cortes*, *Osessione*, and *Haciendo cine* supplemented already established film journals such as *El amante de cine*, but were published specifically for young new talent on the scene. Ironically billing themselves as '*los hijos de Menem*' (the sons of Menem), the founders of the magazine *Film*—Fernando Martín Peña, Paula Félix-Didier, Sergio Wolf and Diego Cabello—were critical of Menem's neoliberal project, but nevertheless applauded the stabilization of the economy, which allowed for new journalistic endeavors. These magazines were a form of communication about the new and pending legislation of the INCAA, reviews of new 'underground' or 'alternative' screen-

ings (often organized and sponsored by film magazines), and articles focusing on young directors.

### ***The Jovenes (Youth) vs. the INCAA Battles for Recognition***

Although young filmmakers had applied for funding from the INCAA, they did not entirely endorse the Film Institute's position on the state of Argentine cinema during the late 1990s. Firstly, young filmmaker Diego Kaplan, who has directed over fifty music videos, vowed that for his first feature-length film, *¿Sabes nadar?* (released in 1998), he would not rely on Film Institute funding. In an interview, he stated: 'It was a completely independent production. I didn't have official support, nor did I apply for it. I didn't want to enter into any kind of institutional delay, nor have an organization that places judgment on whether what I filmed was considered up to par' (Quintans 1998, 37).

Secondly, these emerging directors did not feel represented in the institutional structure of the governing body that incorporates one representative from each film directors' organization (the DAC and the ADA<sup>6</sup>) into decision-making processes. Young directors who do not feel included by either organization have informally banded into the 'Group of 24' and hope to create their own official body. Gregorio Cramer, one of the twenty-four directors, states, 'We wish to defend a form of production that is different from the kind that already exists in Argentine cinema' (Montesoro and Battle 1999, n.p.). Many refer to themselves as 'independent' filmmakers, in the sense that they have no studio or production company backing. They also choose this term because it denotes a certain 'imperfect' aesthetic, a rawness that is purposeful, as compared to the usually polished work of more established filmmakers in Argentina.<sup>7</sup>

French critic Edouard Waintrop has called these film directors 'the orphaned generation' in terms of their cinematic influences. In the Toulouse Film Festival catalogue he wrote, 'One cannot categorize this group as a school nor as a "new wave" of Argentine cinema in the strict sense of the term. Instead, it is more of the entrance of a new generation on the screen' (Montesoro and Battle 1999, n.p.). If any similarities can be found in the work produced by this new group, they include the fact that they generally choose marginalized figures in Argentine society, they do not conform to the same classic styles of camera angles and cuts that earlier directors used, and they typically do not make genre films.

The only Argentine filmmaker mentioned as a possible influence is the early Leonardo Favio, who made moving portraits of solitary human beings, such as his *opera prima*, *Cronica de un niño solo/Chronicle of a Boy Alone* (Argentina, 1965) and *El dependiente/The Dependent* (Argentina, 1967). Oth-

ers cite influences from the American filmmaker John Cassavetes, who fostered the New American cinema movement in the 1970s. A characteristic of these new films is a soundtrack that incorporates national rock bands (the least commercial ones), and in the case of *Pizza, birra, faso*, the location and sounds of a working-class dance hall, a *bailanta*, are used. While these films do not show the 'bourgeois' or 'acceptable' side of Argentine society, one can speculate that the INCAA is supporting these filmmakers because their films have come to serve as public relations tools abroad for a niche market: that of the 'independent' film. From 1998 onward, the Argentine 'independent' film has made waves in the independent film festival circuit abroad.

In addition, the inclusion of this generation of film students pacified a critical mass mounting in the film sector. Fernando Martín Peña, editor of the magazine *Film*, suggested that the support the INCAA has afforded young film directors was not altruistic. He argued that this treatment is a form of co-optation in the traditional populist style of leadership found in Argentina. He states:

It isn't capricious that Marhárbiz has announced a new competition for \$300,000 for each winner [of debut films]. The mass of film students is sufficiently important to pay attention to, and it is the same logic that contributes to filling the movie theaters with young scholarship winners during the Mar del Plata film festival. Once again, the offer of a modest benefit (which still is more than previous administrations) works to placate complaints without having to give up any power. (Martín Peña 1998, 57)

Furthermore, Marhárbiz held on to his popularity because he was able to please almost all sectors of the film industry by giving them opportunities to show their films at home and abroad, and in many cases, they were allotted a small amount of funding. I would argue that even if this was a political maneuver to pacify a particular sector, it has had positive results. Martín Rejtman, who currently teaches at a film school in Buenos Aires, the CIEVYC,<sup>8</sup> and whose most recent film, *Silvia Prieto* (Argentina, 1998) was picked up by Buena Vista (owned by Disney) for international distribution, stated in 1996:

If the Institute, rather than putting one and a half million bucks (*un palo y medio*) into a feature-length film, invested it in ten national films by new people, I think there would be many more possibilities to have two or three successful films than in the present form. (Ricagno and Quintín 1996, 14)

In 1997, Rejtman's line of thought was implemented. From the early 1990s to the present, young filmmakers are becoming more integrated into the film community and culture at large. This in part has to do with the level of

State support granted to this sector from the INCAA and other organizations. In 1999, the first-ever Buenos Aires independent film festival (Buenos Aires Festival de Cine Independiente) was founded by Eduardo 'Quintín' Antín, the editor of the film journal *El amante de cine*, and funded in large part by the city of Buenos Aires. The main objective of the festival was to screen films by first- or second-time film directors from all over the world—no veterans were allowed (West 2001, 50). In this forum, many new Argentine directors were seen by large audiences. This festival has steadily gained momentum and international recognition from its inception to the present by showcasing cutting-edge films not only from Argentina, but from all over the world. Past invited guests and honorees have included Jim Jarmusch, Lourdes Portillo and critic and journalist Jonathan Rosenbaum. Rosenbaum has been so impressed with the festival that he has attended for two years in a row (2001 and 2002) and has given master classes and lectures as part of the festivities. Despite the profound economic problems presently facing the country, Quintín and other festival organizers maintained order and an extensive lineup in one of the newer urban shopping malls, the Mercado del Abasto, during the April 2002 festival. This event has been a beacon of hope for independent filmmakers in Argentina and has given them a platform from which to exhibit their work, interact among themselves, and conduct seminars about the contemporary state of filmmaking in Argentina.

This surge in young independent filmmaking since 1995 has revived the film community in Argentina, if not significantly in a commercial sense. It has caught up with the concerns of a younger, more cynical and disillusioned generation, one that is willing to confront various issues related to the neoliberal crisis affecting the country. The strength of this new movement is an aesthetic that is more daring, experimental and challenging than that which characterized the previous two decades.

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## Notes

- 1 For example, in 1997, Alejandro Agresti's *Buenos Aires, vice versa* (Argentina 1996) drew in 90,000 spectators. In 1998, *Pizza, birra, faso* drew in more than 100,000 people.
- 2 Producer and Film Loan Committee member Claudio Pustelnik stated in an interview that he did not agree with the rejection decision, and suggested that Rejtman appeal. He also emphasized that because this was a new system inevitably there were going to be discrepancies and disagreements. Further-

- more, he acknowledged that these committee decisions were subjective. See 'Entrevista con Claudio Pustelnik: Se reunen diez tipos una mañana, ven la película y opinan', *Haciendo cine* 2, no. 5 (October 1996): 37.
- 3 The schools are called la Escuela de Cine del Instituto de Arte Cinematográfico de Avellaneda, la Escuela Provincial de Cine y Televisión de Rosario, la Universidad de Córdoba and la Universidad de la Plata.
  - 4 In the original Spanish, '... pasa lo mismo con el cine argentino: no se quiere contar, se quiere decir.'
  - 5 Vera Fogwill, daughter of bohemian writer Rodolfo Fogwill, became the 'darling' of young independent cinema for a time. She has starred in numerous films by Agresti, such as *Buenos Aires, vice versa*, *La cruz/The Cross* (Agresti, Argentina, 1997), *La viento se llevó lo que/Gone with the Winded* (Agresti, Argentina, 1998), among others.
  - 6 The DAC stands for Directores Argentinos de Cinematografía and the ADA is the Asociación de Directores Argentina. They are professional associations that have differing perspectives with respect to how Argentine cinema should be produced.
  - 7 The term 'independent' has been debated because the reality is that practically all of the films produced in Argentina (with the exception of those produced by the two studios that remain and by a handful of private production companies) are independently made and financed.
  - 8 The CIEVYC is the Center for Research and Experimentation in Video and Film (Centro de Investigación y Experimentación en Video y Cine).

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